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ABSTRACT

Five approaches currently used in adult English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) literacy instruction are described. A group of strategies developed by Paulo Freire are participatory or learner-centered, and revolve around the discussion of issues drawn from learners' real-life experiences. The Whole Language Approach, more than a specific method or collection of strategies, techniques, or materials is a perspective emphasizing the use of language as a whole, not as discrete parts. Whole language classes work together to develop the curriculum, read and write for and with each other, and evaluate products together. Classroom activities might include extended reading and writing. The Language Experience Approach is a teaching strategy or technique consistent with the whole language perspective. In it, learner experiences are dictated, then transcribed and used as reading material. Lack of authentic reading materials for adult ESL literacy programs has inspired a related approach, one focusing on learner writing and publishing. Most writing-based classrooms follow a writing-process approach in which learners and the teacher brainstorm writing topics, draft pieces, share and confer about writing, revise, edit, and publish in a workshop atmosphere in which reading, writing, and talk are integrated and support each other. Finally, competency-based education, used in adult ESL literacy since the mid-1970s, is based on the learning of competencies expressed in terms of tasks. Four components include assessment of learner needs, selection of relevant competencies, and instruction and evaluation based on those competencies. Contains eight references and four published learner writing references. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Philosophies and Approaches in Adult ESL Literacy Instruction

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Five approaches currently used in adult English as a second language (ESL) literacy instruction include Freirean or participatory education, whole language, language experience approach, learner writing and publishing, and competency-based education. This digest gives an overview of these approaches, which represent a range of practices used in native language and biliteracy programs as well as in ESL classes, with learners whose literacy ranges from limited to advanced.

Freirean/Participatory Approaches

Paulo Freire is an internationally known educator who has helped initiate, develop, and implement national literacy campaigns in a number of developing countries (see, for example, Freire, 1985). Freire began his work in the late 1950s, working with a team of anthropologists, educators, and students to develop a program of initial literacy instruction in Portuguese for rural Brazilian peasants and villagers. Members of the literacy team spent time in the communities developing lists of words and vocabulary that were key to the life there. From these lists, they chose *generative words* that became the basis for helping learners develop basic decoding and encoding skills. Since then, his ideas have been adopted by government-sponsored literacy programs and by nongovernmental organizations throughout the world. Also called participatory, learner-centered, or liberatory education, Freirean approaches revolve around the discussion of issues drawn from learners' real-life experiences. The central tenet is that education and knowledge have value only insofar as they help people liberate themselves from the social conditions that oppress them. The following concepts are central:

- *Generative words and themes.* These are the basis for conversation, reading, and writing activities. Learners begin with encoding and decoding exercises and move to more complex activities.
- *Collaboration and dialogue among equals.* A traditional lecture format, where the teacher talks and the learners listen passively, is replaced by a *culture circle*, where teachers and learners face one another and discuss issues of concern in their lives.
- *Problem posing.* Using objects, pictures, and written texts, teachers and learners describe what they see, examine the relationships among the objects and people represented, and talk about how they feel about what they see. Ultimately, they articulate the problem illustrated and propose solutions.

Among adult educators in the United States, Freire's ideas have been adapted to fit diverse learners and educational contexts. The primary revision is the notion of *emergent curriculum* (Auerbach, 1992), where learners identify their own problems and issues and seek their own solutions. Teachers, freed from doing extensive research to identify problems for learners, become facilitators of class discussions and activities, and learn along with the class.

Whole Language

Like Freirean philosophy, whole language is not a specific method or collection of strategies, techniques, or materials. Instead, it presents a perspective on language learning and teaching (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991). Whole language educators emphasize that language must be kept whole when it is learned or it is no longer language, but rules, patterns, and lists; that written language is as natural as spoken language and needs to be integrated with it in learning; that language uses are diverse and reflect different styles and voices; and that language is social and learned in interaction with other speakers, readers, and writers.

Whole language classes consist of communities of learners who work together to develop the curriculum, read and write for and with each other, and evaluate products together. Classroom activities might include extended reading and writing, with both sustained silent reading and oral reading of a variety of published and student-written works; group development of written texts that grow out of individual or group experiences (language experience approach, described below); direct instruction in effective reading and writing strategies; and ongoing student and teacher evaluation of student work and class success.

Whole language approaches are used in a number of basic and family literacy programs as well as in some workplace literacy programs (Pharness, 1991). A well-known program is located at the Invergarry Learning Centre in Surrey, British Columbia (described in detail in *Sharing What Works*, Center for Applied Linguistics, 1993). Learners entering the program are given a blank, lined notebook and asked to write whatever they want. As they continue to write, their notebooks become reading texts and sources of ideas for further writing. New learners, more experienced learners, and tutors work together as they sit at round tables writing, reading, talking, and conferring about their writing.

Language Experience Approach

The language experience approach (LEA)—really a teaching technique or teaching strategy—is consistent with a whole language perspective. Learners' experiences are dictated, then transcribed, either by the teacher or other learners, and the transcription is used as reading material. Although LEA originated with teachers of elementary school children (Stauffer, 1965), it is used extensively in adult programs. It is ideal for ESL learners with well-developed speaking skills and low-level literacy skills because it capitalizes on their strengths and allows their reading and writing to evolve naturally from their activities and spoken language. LEA also addresses a common concern in adult ESL classes: the lack of appropriate and interesting texts for beginning readers.

Language experience stories can grow out of individual or group experiences that occur naturally or are staged for the class.

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Personal experiences can be dictated by a learner to a teacher or an aide who transcribes them, reads them back to the learner, and then helps the learner read them. For group experiences, the class can choose an experience (such as making lunch or taking a trip somewhere), develop a plan of action (such as assigning ingredients or making schedules), and go through the experience. After the experience, the learners discuss it orally, compose a narrative about it, read the narrative, and participate in follow-up activities (such as developing vocabulary lists and cloze passages, or writing related stories). A teacher acts as the group's transcriber until learners become proficient enough to transcribe for themselves.

Learner Writing and Publishing

A major problem facing adult ESL literacy programs until recently has been the lack of authentic reading materials of interest to adult learners and appropriate for their various levels of English proficiency. Increasing numbers of adult literacy instructors are encouraging adult learners to write about their experiences, and programs internally publish these writings, making them available for other learners to read. Some writing collections have been commercially published and are available for program use throughout the United States and Canada. Writing for publication and reading the writing of peers provides learners many opportunities to reflect on what constitutes good writing. As adult learners find that others are interested in and can benefit from their thoughts and experiences, their experiences are validated, and they are motivated to express themselves in more interesting, worthwhile, and readable ways; as they work to produce a publishable piece of writing, they manipulate language at all levels, from selecting effective genres and discourse structures to correcting grammar and punctuation.

Most writing-based classrooms follow a writing process approach in which learners and the teacher brainstorm writing topics, draft pieces, share and confer about their writing, revise, edit, and publish in a workshop atmosphere in which reading, writing, and talk are integrated and support each other.

Competency-Based Education

Competency-based education (CBE) has been widely used in adult ESL literacy instruction since the mid-1970s. In 1975, the Adult Performance Level project identified a set of competencies (knowledge and skills) viewed as basic for adults to function in the United States (Adult Performance Level Project, 1975). CBE formed the basis for the language and orientation programs in most refugee programs overseas in the 1970s and '80s and in many U.S. programs. It also had an important influence on the development of adult language training programs in the U.S. Peace Corps and is often used in academic and workplace programs. A competency-based learner assessment system—the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) (1982)—is frequently used to satisfy funders' requirements for adult literacy program evaluation.

A competency is an instructional objective described in task-based terms such as "Students will be able to ..." that include a verb describing a demonstrable skill such as *answer*, *interpret*, or *request*. Competencies include basic survival skills such as answering personal information questions, using public transportation, or obtaining food and shelter; or more academic or work-related skills such as taking notes during an academic lecture, following directions for a work-related task, explaining one's position on an issue, or distinguishing between fact and opinion in a newspaper article. Thus, a CBE approach can be used for learners with academic, employment, and self-enrichment goals as well as for those with basic survival goals.

A CBE approach has four components—assessment of learner needs, selection of competencies based on those needs, instruction targeted to those competencies, and evaluation of learner performance in those competencies. Through the initial needs assessment and ongoing evaluation of learner goals and progress, competency-based programs are continually adapted and refined.

Conclusion

Although five approaches have been described separately in this digest, in reality, there is considerable overlap among these approaches, and programs often combine them. For example, programs that have adopted a competency-based approach often incorporate language experience and process writing in their classes; likewise, programs with a holistic or participatory focus may incorporate task-based learning, a CBE practice, in their classes.

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Published Learner Writing

If I were a door— a collection of poetry and prose written by adults in an ESL program. (Available from VOICES: A Creative Community, P.O. Box 2444, Raleigh, NC 27602.)

My Name is Rose—the best known of several student-written publications, published by East End Literacy Press in Toronto, Ontario. (Available from Pippin Publishing, 380 Esna Park Drive, Markham, Ontario, Canada L3R 1H5; 800-567-6591 or 416-598-1866.)

New Writers' Voices—student writing published by New Readers Press. (Available from New Readers Press, P.O. Box 888, Syracuse, NY 13210-0888; 800-448-8878.)

Voices: New Writers for New Readers—a student-produced magazine. (Available from The Canadian Centre for Educational Development, 9260 140th Street, Surrey, British Columbia V3V 5Z4; 604-584-5424.)

This digest summarizes the ideas presented in *Approaches to Adult ESL Literacy Instruction* (J. Crandall & J.K. Peyton, Eds., 1993, McHenry, IL and Washington, DC: Delta Systems and Center for Applied Linguistics). Contributors are JoAnn Crandall (overview and social context), David Spener (Freirean philosophy), Pat Rigg and Francis Kazemek (whole language), Marcia Taylor (language experience approach), Joy Kreeft Peyton (publishing students' writing), and K. Lynn Savage (competency-based approaches). Detailed information on implementing these ideas is given in the book (available from Delta Systems at 1-800-323-8270).

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